Akosa Erinne

Carman

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Before and After

Greek philosopher Heraclitus once declared, “You cannot step in the same river twice." When I first heard this quote as a small child, it confused me. How does a river change? Does that mean what cartographers call the Nile River could change nomenclature to the Ohio River overnight? I still radiate youth and exuberance, but I more clearly understand Heraclitus at the end of this school year. My character indicates no eroding or ebbing; I hold onto my values and strive to fulfill lofty ambitions with the same vigor from the beginning of the year, but I have seen too much in my pursuits to retain the same perspective on life that I had before that first fateful day of junior year in August.

Junior year, despite all of the trials and tribulations it may have presented me, gave me its share of blissful memories. With everything all said and done, I feel truly blessed to have experience some of the events in this past school year with the family and friends I hold dearest. I still remember staring at the ballot for Homecoming Court, laughing, and thinking, “They must be messing with me. What is my name doing here? Is this some kind of joke?” I remember coming to the homecoming game against Mundy’s Mill and feeling humiliatingly overdressed whenever a visitor commented on my attire and awkward stepping forward to receive my scepter as Homecoming Prince. I worried about letting arrogance subconsciously seep into my ego after receiving such an honor, but the plight to remain buoyant in a sea of essays, labs, and worksheets has kept me in a humble state of mind; I am still the same kid trying to learn in what he believes to be a broken education system.

I learned more about managing my responsibilities as a scholar, athlete, and socialite in the first semester of junior year than I learned in freshman and sophomore years combined. My learning cannot be attributed to my experiences serving as my mentor, but to the questions I would slam myself with when the curtains were called and lights were dimmed on said experiences. True, I could blame the majority of my late nights on one problem set or another, but a substantial portion of those late nights were spent longingly gazing at the metaphorical greener grass, wondering, “Could I have done it better? How did I get so far? Can I get much higher? (that last one is my favorite)” I would drive myself to the brink of insanity with one question after another until, somewhere in early March, I had a drastic change in perspective. I was reclining in a couch, thinking about what to write for a journal, assumed an upright position, looked around my dimly lit basement and thought, “What the hell am I doing sitting in the dark by myself? Is this what I want to be doing? Am I really on the way to success? If so, why do I feel like I am losing at the game of life?” In that moment, I decided to answer the questions I spent late nights pondering. I was going to see what happened if I acted like I could not fail. I was going to see if I could get higher than being Homecoming Prince and a Cross Country state champion. I wanted to do the right thing with my basement. I was planning a party. My mother came downstairs to check on me two hours later and, after observing me with a gleam of crazed excitement in my eyes as I moved this thing to that place, was ready to request an exorcism. Two months later, as I write this in my basement and reminisce on some great memories down here, I feel giddy as I realize how life could invert itself and still seem completely unchanged. Throwing these parties has me feeling like a young Jay Gatsby; although I maintain a presence at every one of my get-togethers, I still get this feeling that I am removed from the whole situation. I get this feeling that I derive my enjoyment from just throwing the party and inhaling the mirth in the air. Even though collection of contacts has experienced exponential expansion, I still retain the sense of vigilance that borders on paranoia (if only Gatsby had it) because I still abide by the golden rule that has gotten me through high school with a bearable amount of adversary: keep your network big, but keep your power circle small.

Well, here we are: the last paragraph of the last essay, due the last day of school (by the way, thanks for the extension). I am going to miss the late nights, where I spent more time contemplating how to approach the journals and essays than actually writing them. I’m going to miss feeling like I absorbed an eternity’s worth of solid American literature when the bell rings for the transition from fifth to sixth period, and, most of all, I’m going to miss the classroom discussions with each and every one of the lovely young ladies (yes, I’m including you Mrs. Carman) and gentlemen of fifth period who more than deserved those carnations on Valentine’s Day. After all of the triumphs and defeats of this year, I can finally answer the question that plagued me after Homecoming, after Cross Country and Track, and after every get-together: Can I get much higher? You are probably unsurprised to learn that my answer is a resounding yes, as it was in the beginning of the year. It has truly been a pleasure Mrs. Carman.